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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 000696

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/SINGH/MARCHESE/HARDING

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/16/2017

TAGS: PGOV PREL PTER LE IS SY

SUBJECT: LEBANON: A/S WELCH DISCUSSES DEVELOPMENTS WITH
WALID JUMBLATT

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman. Reason: Section 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) In a 5/15 meeting with Walid Jumblatt, Marwan Hamadeh, Ghazi Aridi and other March 14th figures, NEA A/S Welch assured them that U.S. support is non-negotiable and the pro-reform movement in Lebanon enjoys strong bi-partisan support in Congress. The state of play in the UN Security Council regarding the anticipated Chapter VII resolution was discussed at length, with an emphasis on the need for the Lebanese to press all undecided members as hard as possible during the next week. Jumblatt, while wary of Syrian reaction to the establishment of the tribunal, was relieved that the pro-reform movement can now move on to a well-defined program to buttress Lebanon's fragile democracy.

Concerning Lebanon's upcoming presidential election, A/S Welch informed the group that as long as FPM leader Michel Aoun is in league with Hizballah, the U.S. will not countenance an Aoun presidency. Larger regional issues were also discussed -- the Arab-Israeli conflict, Saudi and Egyptian strategy toward Syria, U.S. strategy toward Iran -- but A/S Welch advised the March 14th leaders to concentrate on issues inside Lebanon that are within their ability to influence. These include opening parliament, the selection of a pro-reform presidential candidate, and continuing political and economic reforms. Jumblatt also expressed deep concern about arms smuggling across the Syrian-Lebanese border. End summary.

¶2. (C) Druse leader Walid Jumblatt hosted the NEA Assistant Secretary David Welch, the Ambassador, NEA Staff Assistant,

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and Embassy notetaker for a dinner at his Beirut residence on May 15. Minister of Telecommunications Marwan Hamadeh, Minister of Information Ghazi Aridi, Druse MP Faysal Sayegh, Sunni MP Misbah Ahdab, and former MP Ghattas Khoury, who is an advisor to parliamentary majority leader Saad Hariri were present.

¶3. (C) Jumblatt appeared to speak for the group when he remarked that it was a great relief to break out of the "vicious cycle" of the past few months and finally be in the end game to establish the Special Tribunal for Lebanon, a process that has placed considerable pressure on the Siniora government and the pro-reform movement. He acknowledged the Assistant Secretary's caution that Chapter VII was not a done

deal by any means and that Siniora government and its allies must exert as much influence as possible in the coming week. All present expressed clear satisfaction that the long, difficult road to the tribunal was nearing an end.

¶4. (C) The Druse leader said that all March 14th leaders were now engaged in trying to convince Security Council members that Chapter VII was the only means to achieve the tribunal. The longer it took to pass a resolution, the more likely it would be that Syria would strike out in one last attempt to block the court it fears. Jumblatt couldn't help but wonder aloud what Hafez al-Asad would have done in the situation his son now finds himself. He was certain that Hafez would never have used the blustery declaration that Bashar issued this week that the "region could go up in flames." Clearly implying that Bashar al-Asad was not up to the task of leading Syria and was vulnerable to direct pressure, Jumblatt (characteristically) urged the U.S. to use its power forcefully, recalling Don Corleone's threat, "to make him an offer he can't refuse."

¶5. (C) Minister of Information Aridi stated that even though he agreed with Jumblatt that Bashar was an ineffective leader who had been successful only in isolating his country from the rest of the Arab world, he was still capable of wreaking havoc in Lebanon and expected the Syrian regime to unleash violence in the near term. Because of this threat, Aridi urged the U.S. to move as swiftly as possible toward Chapter VII, to dissuade both Syria and its supporters in Lebanon.

BEYOND THE TRIBUNAL

¶6. (C) MP Misbah Ahdab, whose district is in the predominantly Sunni city of Tripoli, agreed on the need to

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move quickly for the reasons mentioned by Aridi. He added that the sooner the tribunal issue was settled, the sooner the March 14th group could address the pressing matters that worry the Lebanese people. Of particular concern in the north, he continued, was the growing influence of fundamentalist and pro-Syrian Sunnis. Once considered a power-base for majority leader Saad Hariri, Tripoli and its surrounding region were now vulnerable to pro-Syrian leaders who urged that people re-direct their support away from the Hariri bloc. MP Ahdab believes it is important for Hariri's Future Movement to re-energize its efforts in north Lebanon or they will be bitterly surprised when the next parliamentary elections occur.

¶7. (C) Both Hamadeh and Jumblatt argued that the pro-reform movement also has to pay attention to the Chouf and the region surrounding the strategic village of Jezzine, where they claim Hizballah-affiliated Shia are engaged in an aggressive program of land purchases and consolidation. They conceded that although it is difficult to counter the demographic reality of a rapidly expanding Shia community, Hamadeh believed that an improved economy would allow Druse and Christian landowners to hold on to ancestral lands that they might otherwise be compelled to relinquish. Hamadeh was careful to note that the Shia community was a vital and undeniable part of Lebanon's national identity, but if traditionally important regions like the Chouf and the Biqa Valley became exclusively Shia, the uniqueness of Lebanon as a moderate, pluralistic nation -- the only one in the region -- would soon be lost.

PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

¶8. (C) Echoing previously heard positions, those present agreed that the alliance between Michel Aoun and Hizballah had seriously handicapped the Christian community, which according to Taif and the constitution, has the exclusive

right to propose candidates for the presidency. Aoun not only split the Christian vote, but in effect had given Hizballah a veto on any aspirant for the office. All professed satisfaction with the new resolve of Maronite Patriarch Sfeir, who has not only warned pro-Syrian President Lahoud to respect the constitution regarding the presidency, but has also cautioned Aoun that his half-baked plan to elect a president by popular vote threatened to marginalize the Christian community.

¶9. (C) When informed that A/S Welch would meet with Aoun during his visit, the March 14th leaders urged him to warn Aoun of the consequences of his excessive ambition. A/S Welch stated he would make clear that unless Aoun abandoned his alliance with Hizballah, the U.S. could never deal with him as president. While some members present thought Aoun could come to the realization that his pact with Hizballah was detrimental to the point of breaking the March 8-Aoun coalition, others, particularly Aridi and Jumblatt, flatly stated that Aoun was irretrievable.

¶10. (C) After answering several questions about regional developments, specifically U.S.-Iranian relations and rumored U.S. discussions with Syria, A/S Welch advised those present to concentrate on Lebanese matters. He assured his hosts the U.S. and its allies were serious about trying to achieve progress on a wide range of long-standing regional challenges, but the most effective use of their resources was for the election of a pro-reform president, the strengthening of democratic institutions, and rapid implementation of the political and economic reforms pledged by Lebanon at the Paris III Donors Conference. As at each of his other meetings, A/S Welch also assured those present that the U.S. would not bargain with Lebanon's sovereignty and asked them to pay attention to our actions and not the rumors of those who were inimicable to a democratic Lebanon.

CONCERN ABOUT SYRIAN-LEBANESE BORDER

¶11. (C) At several times throughout the evening, Jumblatt expressed deep worry about arms smuggling across the Syrian-Lebanese border. The March 14 representatives agreed with A/S Welch that the GOL needed to be doing more itself, including raising alarm bells, but also asked that the international community help. A/S Welch asked for the GOL's

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help in allowing the USG to view any seized arms, so that we could help trace the origin.

¶12. (U) A/S Welch has not cleared this message.
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